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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study began by postulating a theoretical model of the dynamics of racial identity choice by biracial children based on the literature cited and counseling experience with biracial children in public educational institutions in Hawaii. The structured interview approach was used with high school students (N=50). A questionnaire sought information on personal and parental demographics, awareness of biracialism, parental racial group identification, and emotions related to being biracial. Results indicated that in this sample of biracial children, subjects had established a racial identity based on the racial identity of one or the other parent, albeit some subjects needed to make additional efforts to do so. One of the shortcomings of this data was that it failed to ask the "who has custody" question for subjects who came from divorced families. The findings of the study suggest that chronological age may be a variable in the biracial child's readiness to accept his or her biracial status. For the most part it appeared that the adolescents in this study had established a dominant racial group identity but were appreciative of their biracial status and were making or had made overtures to broaden their racial group identification. (ABL)

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An exploration into the Dynamics of identity development of biracial adolescents

[A paper presented at the No Nā'Oihana Kōkaa Conference, April 6, 1991, Honolulu, Hawaii.]

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The evolution of the United States as a multicultural society has generated considerable introspection and research relative to racial and ethnic issues. Among such issues is that of intermarriages and biracial children. Since the 1960's there has been an increase in the number of intermarriages although the percentage of such a marriage seems to have remained at 1.5 percent of the United States total (Gibbs, 1987; Shackford, 1984). The latest available statistics indicate that there are 632,000 intermarriages (Shackford, 1984) and approximately one million biracial children in the United States (Gibbs, 1987).

Although racial purity is generally regarded as a myth (Sebring, 1985; Stonequist, 1937) and legal prohibitions to interracical marriage no longer exist nonetheless the socio-cultural implications of American racism is such that interracial marriages are minimally tolerated and biracial children fear they may be labelled "half-breeds" or "mulattoes" or "Oreos" or "Heinz 57 varieties" and denied opportunities because of their biracial heritage (McRoy, 1985; Gibbs, 1987; Sebring, 1985; Shackford, 1984).

Since Erickson's (1968) seminal work on adolescent development, psychological literature has generally focused on the developmental issues of the dominant white culture and only recently has attention been given to the importance of racial/ethnic identity. There is some evidence accruing that black adolescents may have a more difficult time forming a total

identity, which includes a racial and personal identity, within the context of United States racism (Hauser, 1972). Several authors have noted that identity development is a complex task for biracial children who must integrate identifications with parents from two racial/ethnic backgrounds within the context of a predominantly white culture, deal with a society that views their normal family life as pathological because it is interracial, and simultaneously negotiate their status in the peer group (McRoy & Freeman, 1986; Gibbs, 1987; Sebring, 1985). However, some evidence exists that in spite of the difficulties related to the adolescent years, biracialism could be an advantage beyond the pubescent years (Poussaint, 1984).

Models of biracial/bicultural identity development

Among the earliest models of biracial identity development was Stonequist's (1937) explication of the "Marginal Man." Although marginality can occur through migration, education or some other influences, the most obvious type is the person of mixed ancestry (Stonequist, 1937). In spite of the assumptions of the study that the marginal personality is a function of social conditions and not biological, the marginal person model is a personal deficit model since a certain degree of maladjustment is evident in the marginal situation.

The Atkinson, Sue, and Morten (1983) Minority Identity Development model addresses the issue of identity development in a

bicultural or multicultural society. The assumptions of this model that an individual belongs to one racial/ethnic group and has the choice of accepting or rejecting the second/dominant culture, make its application inappropriate for the biracial individual who needs to integrate both cultural identities.

Poston (1990) recognized the limitations of these approaches and proposed the Biracial Identity Development (BID) model as a guide to understanding the identity development process for biracial persons. The BID model suggests a five-stage developmental process: 1) personal identity stage where race/ethnic variables may not be the salient issues, 2) choice of group categorization stage when pressure to make a reference group choice becomes very real, 3) enmeshment/denial stage where confusion and/or guilt exists at having to choose an identity not fully expressive of oneself, 4) appreciation stage where biracial values are explored and the reference group broadened, 5) integration stage where both identities are valued and integrated and find expression in one's lifestyle.

The BID model removes the stigma of inherent maladjustment for the biracial person and allows for the integration of two or more identities for a holistic expression of the biracial individual's personality and lifestyle. Although not definitively stated, the model has an age-stage implication. The BID model assumes a forward movement given optimal conditions.

The dynamics of the racial identity choice process for the

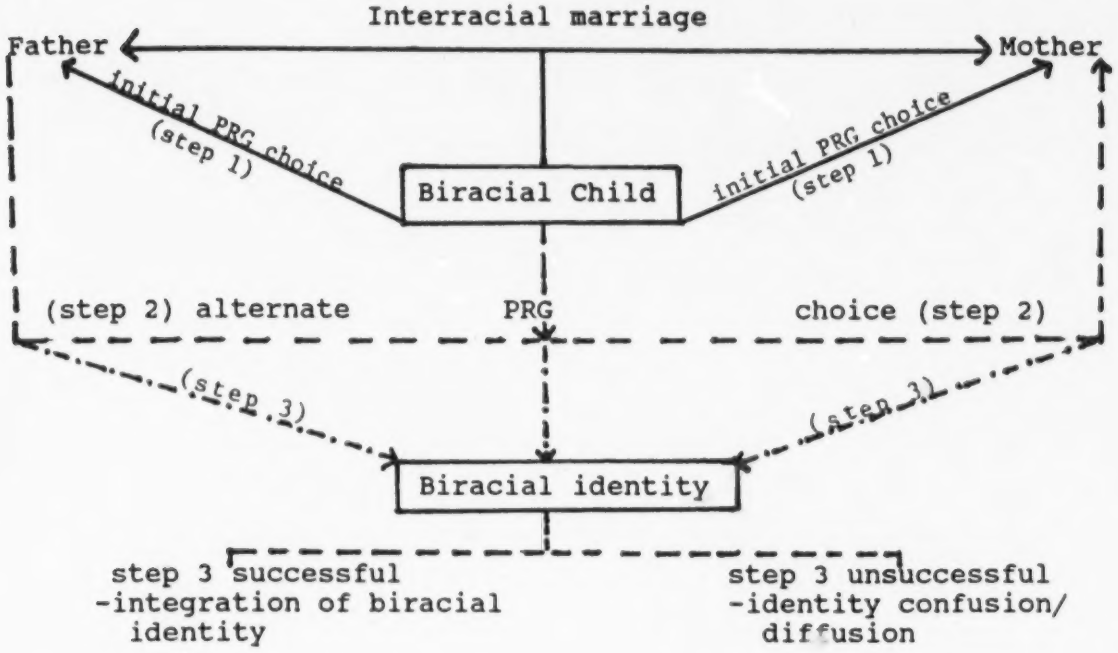
biracial individual is not indicated in Poston's model. Earlier, Hall (1980) investigated the identity of Black-Japanese adults and suggested that experiencing an ethnic identity process had no influence on whether the respondents chose a Black or other identity. However, the dynamics regarding the racial identity process for biracial children remained to be explored.

The Theoretical Model

This exploratory study began by postulating a theoretical model of the dynamics of racial identity choice for biracial children based on the literature cited and counseling experience with biracial children in public educational institutions in Hawaii. Assumptions underlying this model included:

1) that children will attempt to identify with their parents' racial groups;
2) that initial choice of a parental racial group (PRG) would be in direct ratio with the nurturant characteristics of each parent -- the more nurturant the more likely to be the biracial child's initial choice;
3) that for various reasons, the biracial child may not be successful in their initial attempts to identify with a PRG;
4) that social pressure to have a racial identity will motivate biracial children to make further attempts to establish a racial identity with the alternate parent;

Figure I - A theoretical model of the dynamics of PRG identity process for biracial children



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5) that if both attempts to identify with a PRG are unsuccessful, the biracial child will proceed to establish a biracial identity; and

6) that if the third attempt to establish a biracial identity is unsuccessful then the biracial child is likely to experience identity confusion (which may signify psychological maladjustment).

Given these assumptions and the very exploratory nature of

this study, the structured interview approach appeared to be the most plausible method to collect the data. As Hall (1980) indicated, the advantage of this method was that it allowed the researcher to study a larger sample then the case study approach while simultaneously being able to obtain more in-depth information than the mail-in questionnaire method.

An Interview Based Study of Biracial Adolescents

Participants

This study was conducted on Oahu, an island in Hawaii which has both the large metropolitan area of Honolulu as well as suburban and rural areas. Oahu is noted for its large biracial and multicultural population. The volunteer participants of the study were students in Oahu high schools.

The final pool of 50 students included 18 (36%) males and 32 (64%) females. Of the participants 11 (22%) were between 14-15 years of age, 33 (66%) were between 16-17 years of age, and 6 (12%) were 18 years of age. There were 7 (14%) ninth graders, 7 (14%) tenth graders, 16 (32%) eleventh graders, and 20 (40%) twelfth graders who participated in the study.

Every effort was made to include as many racial/ethnic combinations as possible. Parental demographic data indicated that seven racial combinations were represented although the largest group (44%) came from a Caucasian-Asian combination. Forty-four percent of the fathers and 40% of the mothers were high school

graduates and 32% of the fathers and 24% of the mothers were college graduates. In terms of socio-economic class, 66% of the students came from middle-class homes (professional/technical/ managerial occupations of parent(s)). Another important aspect is that 52% of the parents were divorced or separated from the child's other parent.

Procedure

The study utilized the structured interview approach. The students conducting the interviews were graduate interns placed in selected public schools on Oahu. Interviewers were trained to conduct interviews and were familiarized with the terms and context of the questions in a prepared questionnaire. The importance of letting the participants tell their own stories was stressed. After the interview with the biracial child, the graduate students completed questionnaires on each student. The questionnaire sought information on personal and parental demographics, awareness of biracialism, PRG identification and emotions related to being biracial. Questionnaire data were checked against interviewers' case notes for accuracy by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began by grouping subjects according to self-described "successful" or "unsuccessful" initial attempts to relate one or the other PRG. With this factor as the constant, there were

40 subjects in the "successful" group (A) and 10 subjects in the "unsuccessful" group (B). The next step was to analyze the data for groups A and B in terms of parental demographics, awareness of biracialism, PRG identification, and emotions related to being biracial to see what patterns emerged and how they differed from each other. A numerical analysis in terms of numbers and percentages was done and the results have been presented in terms of modal responses to the questionnaire items with significant variations being noted.

Results

This study began with a model suggesting that biracial children would initiate the racial identity process by choosing one PRG. If the initial attempt was successful, this would remain the dominant identity even though successive attempts to identify with the second PRG may have been made with greater or lesser success. With the security of a racial group identity established, the exploration of biracial identity may take place at a later stage. The model also suggested that if the initial attempt to identify with a parent was unsuccessful another attempt to identify with the alternate parent would be made. If the second attempt was also unsuccessful the result could be identity confusion with possible maladjustment.

The findings of this study showed that 80% of the sample were successful in their initial attempts to identify with a PRG

(Group A) and 20% were successful in their second attempt to identify with the alternate PRG (Group B). [Only one subject was unable at the time of the study to establish any PRG identity and was not included in this study.] The data indicated some discernable patterns and these have been presented in a Group A profile (with variations) and a Group B profile (again with some variations).

Group A profile

The typical biracial child in this group was the product of a Caucasian-Asian intermarried couple who had stayed married to each other through the child's adolescent years. The parents were high school or college graduates and both parents had an equivalent level of education. Parents engaged in professional/ technical/ managerial type of work and could be generally classified as middle class.

The Group A biracial child first became aware of the racial differences of his/her parents between the ages of 7-9 years and this awareness was the result of incidents in the home and extended family. Although initially this awareness of biraciality had no impact, later reaction was one of happiness. In the initial choice of a PRG identity fathers dominated. However, no pattern of same-sex or opposite-sex identification was discernable. The primary reason underlying the initial choice of a PRG was the nurturant quality of the parent. Having established a primary racial

identity, the biracial child attempted to also identify with the racial group of the other parent and was generally successful in doing so. Nonetheless, a preference in maintaining one racial identity (in this sample fathers were the initial PRG choice) was evident. With access to two cultures, the Group A biracial child felt privileged and enriched in terms of cultural heritage and would consider an interracial marriage for themselves.

Variations on the Group A biracial child profile occurred for 14 of the 40 students in this group. These subjects were aware of the racial differences in their parents at an earlier age (4-6 years), and this awareness appears to have been precipitated by incidences with peers in school. Although they felt confused and upset at the beginning, they later came to accept these differences with little emotional involvement. Interesting also was the reason given for their choice of initial PRG identification -- these choices being based on the parent belonging to the dominant culture, "other" reasons such as racial stereotypes ("Japanese are smart"), being in a foreign country or grandparents acceptance of them. Some of these children chose not to make any attempts to identify with the alternate parent group. Seven of the 14 subjects said growing up in an interracial home was difficult, but in spite of it, they would consider an interracial marriage.

Those in the Group A pattern who chose to and were successful in their second attempts to identify with the alternate PRG had moved towards a biracial identity at the time of this study. One

person had moved on to a multicultural identity, choosing to identify with others in addition to the racial groups of the parents.

Another finding not anticipated by the model was that Group A subjects who were successful in their initial PRG identification but not successful in their attempts to identify also with the alternate PRG, remained with the initial PRG identity or chose not to identify with either racial group.

Regardless of the variations, few regretted their biracial heritage and everyone in this group would consider an interracial marriage.

Group B

This group included 20% of the sample and was composed of biracial children who were unsuccessful in establishing a PRG identity in their initial attempt. The typical biracial child in this group was also a product of a Caucasian-Asian intermarried couple. However, the parents in all cases were divorced prior to the child reaching adolescence. Some educational disparity was evident in that the fathers were college graduates and the mothers were high school graduates. In terms of socio-economic classification, the Group B child came from a working class (skill/ clerical) home.

Initial awareness of their parents' racial differences occurred between 4-6 years of age for the Group B biracial child

and this awareness was precipitated by incidents with peers in school. These children appear to have had no emotional reaction to their parents' intermarried status at the time of initial awareness or in later (adolescent) years. PRG identification was with the same-sexed parent and was attributed equally to the nurturant quality of the parent or because of similarity in physical appearances. Being unsuccessful in their initial attempt to identify with a PRG, the Group B biracial child attempted to identify with the racial group of the alternate parent and was generally successful in doing so. Thus, their current racial group identity was with the racial group of the opposite-sexed parent.

Variations on the Group B biracial child occurred for two of the ten subjects. One child continued to try to identify with the initial PRG and one chose to identify with a racial group different from that of either parent. Both subjects indicated success in their second attempts. Like their counterparts in Group A, the Group B biracial children felt being biracial was a privileged and enriching experience and they would choose an interracial marriage for themselves.

Discussion and Implications

Several cautions need to be suggested in the discussion/interpretation of the findings of this study. The structured-interview approach with a non-randomized sample has limitations related to generalizability of results. The data also

loses the individual intricacies that a case study approach could provide. However, it does allow for an initial analysis of the data which could show patterns and trends. This was important in an exploratory study of this nature.

An additional consideration is the geographic location of the study. Of all 50 states, Hawaii is considered by many to be the most multiculturally evolved and this may be an atypically nurturant setting for biracial children. It is possible that the results of this study have been positively skewed because of the multicultural society from which the sample was derived.

Results of this study add further cogency to the argument that biracial children are not doomed to a maladjusted existence (Hall, 1980; Poussaint, 1984; Poston, 1990) because of their inability to establish a racial identity. In this sample of biracial children, subjects had established a racial identity based on the racial identity of one or the other parent, albeit some subjects needed to make additional efforts to do so. The findings of this study suggest a departure from Hall (1980) in that the identity decision process did appear to have some influence on the racial identity eventually chosen by 20% of this sample (Group B). One of the shortcomings of this data was that it failed to ask the "who has custody" question for subjects that came from divorced families. This could be a major variable since 100% of Group B subjects came from divorced families and indicated a change in PRG identity at the time of the study. Was the initially perceived unsuccessful

attempt at establishing a PRG identity affected by the custody of the child by that parent? The structured interview format could not anticipate these questions and they remain as areas for further research. Also not anticipated was the students' reaction to rejection by the initial PRG. Group B children recalled no emotional impact initially or later and here again the spectre of divorce raises questions. Given the traumatic effect of divorce on children, was the lack of any emotional reaction by the Group B biracial child due to an emotionally anesthetizing effect of their parents' divorce?

The findings of this study suggest that chronological age may be a variable in the biracial child's readiness to accept their biracial status. Group A children reported that their awareness of their parents' racial differences, and thus their own biraciality, came at a later age (7-9 years) than Group B children (4-6 years). Although initially both groups indicated no emotional reaction, Group A subjects reported that later during their adolescence they were "happy" about their biracial status whereas Group B subjects continued to indicate "no impact." Further research is needed to explore whether Group B subjects' responses in this regard signified a neutral acceptance, a fatalistic acceptance or perhaps emotional distance vis-a-vis their biracial status.

In the context of Poston's (1990) theoretical model of biracial identity development, the subjects of this study appear to fit into stage 4, the Appreciation stage. These adolescents had

established a dominant racial group identity but were appreciative of their biracial status and were making or had made overtures to broaden there racial group identification. Follow-up and/or cohort group research is needed to determine who, when, and how the transition to the final stage of Poston's model, integration of a biracial identity, is accomplished.

In terms of this author's model of the individual dynamics of the identity choice process, the findings of this study appear to substantiate the initial and secondary steps in establishing identity with a PRG. An insufficient number of subjects (only one) among those interviewed were unsuccessful in both attempts and therefore it was not possible to verify whether step three, attempt to establish a biracial identity would occur or whether these children would experience identity confusion. Based on the findings of this study it appears that a fully integrated biracial identity is more likely to occur when children have initially been successful in identifying with one or the other PRG.

As American society evolves and matures on the multicultural continuum, hyphenated racial identities are likely to increase, adding further diversity to America's population. The findings of this study add credence to the importance of a racial identity in the total identity development of an individual. The continued efforts of children to successfully identify with their PRG speaks to this important developmental need. Increased social and institutional recognition of interracial group membership could

greatly facilitate the biracial child's identity development and integration process.

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